

Activity vs. Activism in The Church

By Edward C. Fredrich

That the conflicts and tensions suggested in the title are real and relevant was vividly demonstrated this summer at Lake Lemman, Switzerland. At the lake's southern tip stands Geneva, headquarters of the World Council of Churches, the outspoken advocate of human salvation in the secular and social sense. The World Council of Churches provides room in its philosophy and program for the approach designated as *activism* in the title. While that term has been used generally as the broad counterpart to the contemplative aspect of the Christian life, its more modern and specific connotation, employed consistently in this article, carries the suggestion of involvement in the affairs of the political arena and the social struggles of the day. Cases in point are the frequent political pronouncements that periodically emanate from the WCC Geneva headquarters and what the Church of England in its summer meeting disparagingly referred to as the WCC's "controversial grants to liberation movements."

Lausanne, on Lake Lemman's northern shore and only thirty miles from Geneva, this summer hosted the International Congress on World Evangelism, which brought together "evangelical" leaders from some 150 countries, many of whom have been outspoken critics of WCC activism in the past. Speculation that a rival organization to the WCC might emerge at Lausanne proved groundless. As a Religious News Service correspondent put it, Evangelist Billy Graham

took the wind out of the separatists' sails by commending more evangelical responsibility toward the social and economic miseries of humanity. He was joined by an influential group that defined the Gospel in terms of God's total claim on social as well as individual life. Problems of unemployment, race, war, and inflation were not seen as "secular" but as issues to be dealt with in obedience to the lordship of Christ.

A key section of the Lausanne Covenant which came out of the International Congress on World Evangelism deals with "Christian Social Responsibility." Observers at the Lausanne gathering have stated that the final draft represents an intensification of the stress on social responsibility that emerged after plenary presentations and conference interaction. Because of the timeliness of the statement and its relevance to the subject under discussion and because it represents the thinking of those who previously have been regarded as being opposed to WCC activism, we reproduce in full Section 5 of the Lausanne Covenant on "Christian Social Responsibility":

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men from every kind of oppression. Because mankind is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist. When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our

personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead. (Acts 17:26,31; Gen. 18:25; Isa. 1:17; Psa. 45:7; Gen. 1:26,27; Jas. 3:9; Lev. 19:18; Luke 6:27,35; Jas. 2:14–26; John 3:3,5; Matt. 5:20; 6:33; II Cor. 3:18; Jas. 2:20)

Although the door seems to be opened to almost any kind of activism by such sweeping phrases as “liberation of men from every kind of oppression,” and “evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty,” some at Lausanne regarded the statement as inadequate. A rump session of several hundred produced “A Response to Lausanne” that called for a firmer and fuller espousal of activism and that was distributed to Congress participants. In its argumentation this protest advanced the proposition: “There is no biblical dichotomy between the word spoken and the word made visible in the lives of God’s people.”

If Lake Lemman’s “crystal face” was riled and its “clear, placid” waters were muddied this summer by the currents and crosscurrents of contemporary opinion on activism, this is not too surprising. Conflict and confusion has prevailed in this area for most of this century and has intensified in recent decades. If the current of opinion this summer was flowing strongly in the Geneva direction, that too is in accord with prevailing conditions in this century. More and more church bodies are espousing more and more activism than ever before.

Quondam Phantom Heresy

A look back to the turn of the century serves to indicate how far exponents of activism have come in recent times. In 1899 Leo XIII addressed to Cardinal Gibbons an Apostolic Letter, *Testem Benevolentiae*, which opened with a declaration of papal affection for the United States branch of his church but which went on to fault a trend of “Americanism” or “Activism.” In the last decades of the previous century some were strongly advocating that the Roman Church in the United States break out of its isolated, immigrant shell to play a more active role in community and national affairs and perhaps play down certain aspects of Roman doctrine and practice in an energetic program of improving image and winning converts. Leo’s letter emphatically rejected the views that “active” virtues are better than the “passive” variety and that vows are to be downgraded as limiting freedom of action. He insisted that Roman doctrine was fixed and that only the Church, not individuals, could make adaptations in the rule of the Christian life.

Reaction to Leo’s *Testem Benevolentiae* was mixed, though not in the usual sense. To a man the American hierarchy agreed with the teachings Leo set forth, but also to a man the bishops asserted that they had not espoused the “activist” tendencies singled out for reprimand. So unanimous was the endeavor to disclaim all responsibility for views that would now be regarded as only a mild form of activism that the repudiated “Americanism” or “Activism” in Leo’s letter acquired the nickname, “the phantom heresy.”

In a short time the phantom was acquiring reality and substance. The publication of Rauschenbusch’s *Christianity and the Social Crisis* in 1907 can well be regarded as a hinge-event that marked the beginning of the social gospel era in American Christianity. Since then the social gospel movement has had its ups and downs, its spurts and surges through the efforts of millennialists and its restraints and revisions at the hand of realists, but it and its inevitable offspring of activism have not ceased to be factors to be reckoned with in the national and international religious scene.

Especially in the years since World War II have the religious activists come to the fore. Protest and involvement have been deemed the magic words with which to conjure the changes and improvements needed to make the bad, old world and church new and good. Many a church body became so activist that it scarcely retained the right to be designated church.

The Necessity of Activity

That is not to say that churches are not to be active and busy. In the scheme of paired but opposite extremes, excesses, evils that veer from the golden mean, the counterpart of activism is quietism. The mean is

God-assigned activity. Christian contemplation and renunciation is carried to extreme when the contemplation does not find the way to confession and witness and when the renunciation results in the Christian's being neither *of* nor *in* the world.

The church that heeds its Lord's direction, "Go and preach," will be an active church. Taking seriously its message and its mission, the church will shoulder a host of tasks and assignments involving the individual believer, the grouping of believers, and the unbelievers. These assignments are so self-evident and so numerous that any complete enumeration is neither necessary nor possible. Preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments suggests so much activity that the church's work is "never done."

When the gospel preached is accepted more activity is set in motion. The gospel changes those who believe it. It makes them trusting and joyful children of their Heavenly Father. It motivates and empowers them to do His will. The life of sanctification involves both "passive" and "active" virtues. It enlists all believers, for under any and all conditions faith without works remains the ultimate contradiction in terms. What James and Paul teach us about the relation between justification and sanctification means that the church will always be the gathering of a peculiar and purified people "zealous of good works."

God's people will do works of charity as individuals acting alone and also together with others in so-called corporate acts of mercy. Congregations and larger groupings of believers have in all eras of church history concerned themselves about feeding and clothing and harboring the needy and about comforting and aiding the sick and forsaken and distressed.

The little that has been said on this obvious point should suffice to rule out the thought that any questioning of activism must imply an endorsement of quietism. The picture that has been sketched is one of a church necessarily and ceaselessly and extensively active. In fact, the extent of the church's inescapable activity suggests one additional point in this connection. It is the corollary that the church, blessed and burdened by its Lord by so great a task and so many assignments of His own devising, will do well to "stick to its last," husband its time and energy for the given assignment, and avoid taking on additional tasks of human devising. In short, the church is not to let its God-appointed activity be diverted and distorted by activism.

Symptoms of Activism

Activity and activism are often confused. There may be situations where the confusion is understandable, if not excusable. Activity and activism in the church can on occasion look very much alike on the surface and to the casual observer, as alike as the words in question. However, a definite basis for making distinctions exists.

The broad goal of the activity and of the activism may well be the same, the good of the neighbor. The activist will look beyond the individual person and his problems to the social or political or economic situation out of which the problem arises. His efforts will go to reforming or transforming society as a whole at the community or national or international level. Such reformation or transformation may be necessary and profitable in the given instance, but it is neither necessary nor profitable that the activism be church-sponsored.

The church works at its best when the concern is, not society as a whole, but the individual members of society. Through the work of the church tremendous forces have been unleashed for change in nations and in the world. But the changes have been effected as more and more individuals heard and believed and lived their faith. The church seeks the good of the neighbor by working for that neighbor's conversion and sanctification. The gospel and the sacraments require and produce believing hearts, individual believing hearts. Three thousand can be converted on one occasion but the conversions are all one-on-one situations involving the one Holy Spirit and the one believer. The charity of the church may in one instance change a hundred persons from needy to less needy but the change has been a matter of helping that many persons and not of social engineering.

The tools of the activist are social, economic, political. Laws are passed or repealed or amended. Group pressure is exerted. Public opinion is shaped. Again, this is not to say that there is anything wrong with such tactics in their proper place.

That place is not the church. The working tools of the church are Word and sacrament. It proclaims that Word on Sunday morning and does not need to campaign for blue laws to support the effort. The Word will supply gospel strength and motivation to hearers and believers and will guide them in their sanctified living. Blessing and good will be effected to God's glory and man's benefit as these believers then carry out their civic obligations.

These are identifying characteristics of the activist in the church: his preoccupation with the society behind the individual and his employment of the tools and means other than the means of grace. In many activists these characteristics are associated with a tendency to downgrade confessionalism and denominationalism for the sake of the cause and to substitute for the heavenly hope a jerry-built heaven-on-earth. However, there may well be an activist who avoids such tendencies and consequently they are not included in the list of absolute and essential marks.

Heresy of Heresies

The previous identification and description of activism indicates how dangerous to the church it is. We are confronted here, not by an isolated, circumscribed error, but a basic, far-reaching evil that threatens the very foundations.

Activism in the church gets in the way of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. It is hard enough under any circumstances to convince the sinner of his guilt. Focusing all the attention on some massive social ill will not make the task any easier. Where there is no contrition, there can be no conversion by and to the gospel. Appreciation for the gospel and its pardon and peace must diminish if all energies and efforts are channeled in other directions.

Activism in the church distorts the mission of the church. There are agencies enough for directing and shaping the politics and economics of our society. Let the church be church. It has a unique role to play, a role that is desperately needed, the role of proclaiming to lost sinners forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in Christ Jesus. Nothing else dare compete with or replace that noble and ennobling assignment.

Activism in the church necessarily results in a confusion of church and state. Church activism lays hold of the tasks and the tools of the state. The state has at its disposal natural reason to promote natural righteousness and does not need the often misguided efforts of church activists to carry out what is properly its business. We are grateful for the national blessing of two centuries of separation of church and state. The state, thank God, is not threatening this blessing. Church activists are. The familiar statement in *Augustana XXVIII* merits constant review:

Therefore, the two authorities, the spiritual and the temporal, are not to be mingled or confused, for the spiritual power has its commission to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Hence it should not invade the function of the other, should not set up and depose kings, should not amend temporal laws or undermine obedience to government, should not make or prescribe to the temporal power laws concerning worldly matters.

Activism in the church undermines Christian hope, the hope of heaven. Whether the activist does this deliberately by an espousal of "secular Christianity" or without intention as he adds goals of this world to those of the other world does not matter in the final analysis. The result is the same. Even the best of believers have enough worldly goals and concerns of their own. For the church to add other distractions by a program of social and political endeavors represents the height of dangerous folly. How in that situation can hope be expected to abide?

Phantom Incarnate and Present

“Americanism” with its mild, incipient activism may have turned out to be “the phantom heresy” when this century was still very young. Today we are confronted by its embodiment and enlargement at the very gates.

The geographical designation is in itself a warning. The church in America, no matter what the denomination, has throughout its history been long on what could be called the active side of religion. The heritage of the young, immigrant, frontier church is still with us. Activity in the church, and activism, have an appeal for all of us. The down-to-earth programs and the practical results of the activist are what American Christians by nature like best

It would be a mistake for Lutherans to think themselves immune. It may well be that the Reformed and the Roman way more readily lend themselves to a pattern of church involvement in political affairs and church domination of the state. But the record is clear that Lutheran bodies in this country have activist tendencies. We have grown used to conventions of the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church expressing themselves on a variety of social and political questions of the day. More recently the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has committed itself to its “Mission Affirmations,” which with the stress on the “total person” make room for the activist and concerning which our synod’s 1971 *Reports and Memorials* states:

The document gives little evidence, once so prominent in the Missouri Synod, of an appreciation for the vital relationship between the Church’s mission and faithful adherence to God’s sacred Word in all its parts. Coupled with that, the *Mission Affirmations* sounds a tragically unclear tone relative to the one basic task or mission of Christ’s church: namely, that repentance and remission of sins should be proclaimed in all the world. As a result, the document can be used, and has thus been used, to justify activities by the church far removed from the real mission which Christ has entrusted to His Church on earth—and even contrary to His Word. It is with deep regret that we note this growing unclarity in our former sister synod regarding the Savior’s simple injunction to preach the Gospel to every creature.

To make this warning against activism as direct and personal as possible, we look at our own church body. In theory always and in practice most of the time the Wisconsin Synod and its members disavow activism. But in 1963 this synod’s convention adopted as its own the following Conference of Presidents statement regarding federal aid to church-related schools: “Such assistance also violates the constitutional principle of separation of Church and State, using tax monies gathered from all citizens for the promulgation of a specific religion or faith.”

One may well agree with the statement made and at the same time question the propriety of a church body in convention playing the role of interpreter of the constitution regarding a question that has in various forms evoked a 5–4 decision by the Supreme Court of the U.S. One can share the overriding concern for the church’s educational system that motivated the resolution but at the same time fear that playing even so mild a political role may prove habit forming, as has so often been the case. It is heartening to see that subsequent statements on the same subject give no indications whatever that a habit is being formed. If activism is to be resisted, also the beginnings will have to be resisted. Vigilance and consistency are required for an effort in which much is at stake.

Two centuries and a decade ago Lausanne and Lake Lemman played host to Gibbon who in his *Decline and Fall*, according to the poet, carried out a policy of “sapping a solemn creed with solemn sneer.” Those at Lausanne last summer and at Geneva now certainly have no intention of being opponents of Christianity but by giving in to or going all out for church activism they can and will surely sap Christianity’s creed and strength more effectively with their solemn misconception than Gibbon with his solemn sneer.